

The Standards of Learning work because the tests count

Mark Christie

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article, the fourth in *Virginia Issues & Answers* on Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOLs), responds to an article by Lawrence H. Cross in the spring 2000 issue of *Virginia Issues & Answers* (volume 7, number 1). Both Dr. Cross and Mr. Christie have now had the opportunity not only to express their views on the SOLs, but also to respond to each other's suggestions to policymakers for addressing educational reform.

Lawrence H. Cross's response ("The Standards of Learning reform: Real consequences require real tests," volume 7, number 1) to my article ("Standards of Learning: Why Virginia' education reform is working," volume 6, number 2) is more notable for what he fails to address rather than what he does.

As with many who criticize Virginia's standards-and-accountability effort, he prefers to attack various aspects of the Standards of Learning (SOL) tests and avoid confronting the fundamental reasons for the initiation of the SOL effort or the compelling reasons for its continuance.

Unlike many SOL critics, however, who claim, "I'm all for standards and accountability, but . . ." before advocating changes that would essentially gut both, Professor Cross is admirably straightforward about his agenda: he writes in his article that he "had hoped" that his and other SOL criticism would have caused state policymakers "to abandon this test-driven reform of public schools."

I pointed out in my first article that the SOLs were launched as an effort to raise the achievement levels of Virginia students, especially those who had been falling through the cracks in Virginia's schools and whose lack of achievement had been covered up for years with social promotion and the awarding of diplomas that were often meaningless as indicators of real achievement. I offered numerous data that illustrated the very real problem the SOLs address, for example, the fact that for an entire decade after the Literacy Passport Test was launched in the late 1980s, approximately one in three Virginia sixth-graders failed this rudimentary literacy test (with failure



rates much worse in many urban and rural school divisions) and, even more troubling, that over that decade there was absolutely *no evidence whatsoever* of improvement.

Professor Cross did not address this issue at all in his article. Some SOL critics deny that there has been an achievement problem in Virginia's public schools that needed to be addressed at all and take a firm stance in defense of the pre-SOL *status quo*. Other critics, notably some of Professor Cross's colleagues on education-school faculties, even ridicule the idea that student achievement, measured objectively, matters that much anyway, asserting that whether a child can correctly multiply six times seven or identify Virginia's neighboring states on a map is not nearly as important as whether the student

"knows where to look it up," has sufficient "self-esteem," and can "work cooperatively with others." I do not ridicule the latter, which have their place, but the SOL effort has restored a necessary focus on the acquisition by individual students of core skills and knowledge, a focus belittled by too many members of education-school faculties.

I also made the fundamental point that it is precisely because the SOL tests have real, not sham, consequences, that Virginia's reform is working and to remove or diminish the consequences would do a grave disservice to school children. The "test-driven reform" that Professor Cross and other critics deride and want to abolish has forced schools to focus on student achievement for *all* students, not just those who are easier to teach. Wayne Harris, superintendent of Roanoke city schools, said that the quality of teaching in Roanoke schools has improved because of Virginia's SOLs: "Teachers are working harder, teaching better, and taking their jobs more seriously because of the SOLs." ("SOLs help teachers' methods, guidance," *Roanoke Times*, June 20, 2000)

One African-American mother from an inner-city school told me, "Now my child counts, too." That child counts because

the new accreditation formula requires all schools eventually to reach the 70-percent pass rate by 2007 or risk loss of accreditation. In the past, students who were too easily advanced from one grade to the next, regardless of whether they had learned anything, must now take the SOL tests, and those scores count toward a school's accreditation. That means that these kids must receive attention. Before the SOLs, far too many children did *not* get that attention, and any SOL critic who denies that is denying reality.

Professor Cross criticizes my article for not addressing his specific criticisms of the SOL tests, but given that Professor Cross and many other SOL critics are ideologically opposed to what he terms "test-driven reform," my point was that our disagreement is not about the specific details of tests but about fundamental beliefs. He believes that objective tests should not be used for accountability purposes. I—and other SOL supporters—believe that without objective data about student achievement derived from standardized tests and *real* consequences tied to that data, accountability in our schools will be nothing more than a Potemkin village—and the students will be the ultimate losers, just as they were under the pre-SOL *status quo*.

Specifically, Professor Cross criticizes the Virginia SOL tests for being too short and not having enough items. Other critics attack them for being primarily multiple choice. Yet, in Massachusetts, where the state tests used for school accountability are a combination of multiple choice, short answer, and essay and are much longer than Virginia's, critics of that state's accountability effort attack the tests as "too long," "too demanding," and "too open to subjective judgments." Professor Cross urges Virginia to drop testing in science and social studies and focus on English and math; yet in Florida and other states that do exactly as he proposes, the critics of accountability complain that giving tests only in English and math "narrows the curriculum" and forces schools to ignore science and social studies.

The lesson is obvious: *those who oppose standards and accountability in our public schools will attack any test, regardless of how that test is structured*, in their zeal to avoid real consequences for a lack of student achievement. For the opponents of accountability, *no test is good enough*. It is the age-old game of "attack the messenger if you don't like the message."

Let me restate two other important points from my earlier article. First, it is our obligation as members of the Virginia Board of Education to insist that our test vendor and the state Department of Education work hard to make the SOL tests as sound, as fair, and as logistically efficient as they possibly can be. We are doing that. Constructive suggestions from Professor Cross and other educators are always welcome, as long as they are aimed at improving our accountability structure, not tearing it down.


Second, it is our obligation to make the accreditation system as fair and reasonable to the schools as possible. We are doing that also. We have made many responsible changes to the Standards of Accreditation requested by organizations of Virginia educators. As just one example, we will now allow schools to average test results over a three-year period if that helps the school's rating (or the school can use its current year's results, if that is better), so that a school can benefit from a trend of multiyear progress even when one year's student cohort performs lower than expected.

We also have dramatically expanded the testing options available to students. We have approved the use of Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), SAT-2, and other tests if students choose to substitute these tests for SOL tests to earn graduation credits. As I stated above, however, for those ideologically opposed to tying school accountability to student achievement measured objectively, no test will ever be good enough.

Contrary to what some critics allege, SOL reform is not about making the public schools look bad. On the contrary, we on the state Board of Education want the public schools to succeed, for their sakes and for the sakes of their students. Professor Cross and other critics frequently assert that because the public schools have no control over the often-dreadful home environments of many of their poor and disadvantaged students that the schools should not be held accountable for the academic performance of these students. I noted in my first article that I was mindful that public schools, unlike private schools, must accept any child who shows up at their doors, regardless of the pathologies that child brings, and I fully agree that the public schools should not be held accountable for the things over which they have no control. It is eminently fair and reasonable, however, to hold schools accountable for the things they *do* control, such as *what* they teach and *how* they teach it. There is persuasive empirical evidence that a content-rich core academic curriculum and proven teaching methods do raise student achievement, even among poor and disadvantaged children. And as *Washington Post* columnist William Raspberry wrote, "For these children, either they get it at school, or they don't get it at all."

We also know that we must have a partnership with educators if this effort is to succeed. We have shown a willingness to be open to educators' constructive suggestions and have accepted many of them.

We must not and will not, however, retreat on the fundamental principles that are driving this new focus on student achievement in our schools and that are producing tangible signs of success. While test results are up this year, in many cases quite substantially—and we welcome those results—there will be future years in which an individual student cohort performs below-par, which is why we will allow schools to average scores over three years to give a fair representation of that school's progress.

The key to success will be Virginia's willingness to persevere with this reform over the long haul. The experience from other successful states shows that the essential factors to success in raising student achievement are rigorous academic standards that raise expectations of both students and schools, accountability, and a willingness to stay the course. The winners of this debate will not be Mark Christie or Lawrence Cross, SOL supporters or critics, but the school children who, because we insisted that schools be held accountable for student achievement, will be better educated, be better prepared to succeed in a global economy, and be responsible citizens of a democracy. 

MARK CHRISTIE, an attorney, has been a member of the Virginia Board of Education since 1977. He was chief counsel and policy director for Governor George Allen.